

Appleby Archaeology Group    December Meeting

Dec 2003

Georgina Plowright, a founder member of the Appleby Archaeology group, was given a warm welcome when she returned to speak at their December meeting. Roman Domestic Life on the Frontier was the subject of her talk and she explained that much of the evidence she had come from Housateads, Chesters and Corbridge, where she is curator for English Heritage.

She began by outlining the types of households that provided the back drop to domestic life at the time. The upland native farms such as Ewe Close, steeped in the traditions of the ancestors were contrasted with the Mediterranean style building of the commanding officer's house at Housateads. Grand civilian houses or villas, are not found in the vicinity of Hadrian's wall. The most northerly is at Piercebridge in Durham. Far more common are strip houses found in the civilian settlements around the forts. At Corbridge, several of these houses jostle to take advantage of a frontage on Stanegate. Some are open fronted which suggests that they may have been business premises such as cart repair shops, food retailers and taverns. There was a mingling of cultures as the native Britons became involved in providing services to the Roman army and this would have increased, in time, as intermarriage with the civilian population took place.

Evidence of domestic life comes from several sources but it was emphasised that most informed us about the upper levels of society. Coins, sculptures and carvings on tombstones can show the hairstyles, fashions and furniture in use at the time. Artefacts including pottery, items of jewellery, pieces of plaster, tiles and textiles, all help to build up a picture of civilian life. The Vindolanda tablets give us an insight into family life. One records an invitation to a birthday party and another includes a passage from Virgil apparently written as part of a lesson with the comment "sloppy" added by the tutor.

Georgina then spoke about life inside the home. The houses were probably quite dark and a number of lighting methods were used. These included oil lamps, which used olive oil or animal fats, candles, some of which could be stuck into the wall and light from the hearth or brazier. Keeping warm may have been difficult and not surprisingly there is evidence of insulation using moss and fungi and at Vindolanda puffballs may have been used. Tombstones depict bedclothes of various patterns and textures and analysis of dyes from Vindolanda suggests that textiles came in a range of colours.



We heard about the clothes worn, or the lack of them as it appears that underwear was not part of Roman dress. The tunic was the basic garment for both sexes and more than one tunic may have been worn with a cloak or mantle. Heavy working materials may have been worn on the frontier,

If there is one area where nothing has changed, it is a woman's need for cosmetics. Evidence of foundation, face powder, rouge, and eye makeup were referred to as was the use of depilatory pastes. In Corbridge a number of flask were found and it is thought that these would have contained aromatic oils used on visits to the baths. A number of mirrors and hairpins have been found as have other toilet items such as tweezers, nail cleaners and ear picks.

Pets seem to have been part of the family. One tombstone depicts a lady nursing a bird and there are several sculptures of dogs and one of a little Scottie dog: can be see in the Chesters collection. The Vindolanda tablets mention two types of hunting dog segosi and vertraga. The latter was highly praised by its owner Arrian, who commented that the dogs were at their best "when they sleep with a man". A sentiment no doubt echoed by many today.

A varied diet was enjoyed. Meats, cereals, game and fish were all eaten and washed down with wine and celtic beer. Some dining was done reclining on couches using three legged tables but a relief shows people sitting on chairs. Knives and spoons were used but not forks. Pewter and pottery dishes have been found and it is likely that poorer households would have used wooden plates which have not survived.

A number of other aspects of domestic life were mentioned to give a real insight into the daily lives of those living on the frontier during the Roman occupation.

Georgina was warmly applauded and thanked for coming to speak to the group and over coffee answered many questions from those present.

The next meeting will be the AGM and Members Evening on Tuesday January 13th, in the Supper Room, Market Hall, Appleby at 7pm. The AGM will be followed at 7.30pm by two short talks by members of the group on Crake Trees, a Medieval House and on Hartsop Hall Lead Mine

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